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technology— and colorado early education staff

—helping deaf and hard of hearing
children with disabilities

By Dee Shuler-Woodard

The youngest deaf and hard of hearing children with disabilities in Colorado can now participate more fully in the world around them thanks to funding from grants solicited through the Early Education Department at the Colorado School for the Deaf and the Blind. The grants enable the children, from birth to age 3, to overcome their physical limitations by adapting their environment to support their ability to participate actively in their daily home activities. This may include the ability to play successfully with toys and other children, to communicate needs and ideas, to make choices, and to move independently and participate in family life. Through technologically sophisticated kits and trained professionals, these children are able to turn on the TV, make milkshakes, play tapes, and activate bubble machines.

The Technology

The kits are called "Quick Start Environmental Kits" and they contain everything needed to start using augmentative assistive communication in a child's home. Each kit has a Powerlink® 3 control unit that gives a child the ability to activate and control many common home electric appliances, such as toys, lamps, blenders, and other devices. The child uses special switches called jelly bean switches, connected to the Powerlink® control unit, to control the toys or appliances. The switches are large, colorful, and require very little pressure to activate, allowing children with disabilities to manipulate them more easily. The kits also contain battery interrupters that allow the child to control battery-powered toys with a jelly bean switch.

Some kits also contain an additional tool, appropriate only for some children, called the Big Mac. Big Macs are speech generating devices that hold approximately two minutes of a pre-recorded message. These can include asking a family member for a kiss, a hug, a tickle, or any activity that would include the child. The goal is to have the child initiate the interaction versus being a passive participant in family life.



Support from the Colorado Early Education Staff

Kits were purchased for each Colorado hearing resource coordinator in the 10 regions of Colorado providing early intervention services through the Colorado School for the Deaf and the Blind. The coordinators attained training from an augmentative assistive communication (AAC) consultant in order to use the kits with children in the Colorado Home Intervention Program. To date, 12 children and their families have participated in the AAC consultant evaluations. Each family has continued to use the loaned devices and many have sought to purchase devices for their own permanent use.

Success at Home and at School

Each family experienced positive changes using the kit during the one-hour evaluation. In one instance, a young nonverbal boy used a Big Mac device to get his father and brother's attention so they would come over and tickle him. The interactions, smiles, tears, and giggles between the family members were priceless.

The kits have proved to be effective in facilitating the transition between home-based services and school as well. In another part of Colorado, a young boy turned 3 and he began receiving Part B services in the school system. He had been using the AAC devices in his home effectively enough that the school was able to accommodate his needs and adjust his curriculum to maximize his learning potential through switch use. This is a beautiful example of collaboration, teamwork, and expanding the use of technology in a child's life from home to school.

Over time, as children and their families become familiar with using this technology, they become more confident and enjoy increased opportunities for school success. They understand the cause and effect of switch use and how to use the switches and devices to access their environment successfully and independently. Familiarity with these devices also fosters family awareness of additional devices that may be appropriate for their child.

The Kennedy Trust Fund grant program is an outreach activity of the Colorado School for the Deaf and the Blind (CSDB), available for school districts and non-profit organizations throughout Colorado. This program was funded through the initiative of CSDB early childhood educators who applied for a Kennedy grant that was awarded for the 2007-2008 school year. This first grant supported the purchase of the kits and initial training for the coordinators. The second grant, also a Kennedy grant, was awarded for the 2008-2009 school year and allowed for additional in-depth training of the coordinators and family consultations with the augmentative assistive communication consultant.

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